

State supports wetlands project in Cape to kill phragmites

By RICHARD DEGENER Staff Writer, (609) 463-6711

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— The state has signed off on a plan by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to flood Pond Creek Meadow with saltwater to kill phragmites marsh reeds.

The project to turn about 170 acres of freshwater marsh dominated by the invasive reed into saltwater wetlands with native cordgrasses is consistent with the state's coastal zone management rules, according to the state Department of Environmental Protection. The main goal of the project is to increase biological diversity.

A recent report from the DEP delved into how the project would affect wetlands, dunes, rare species of wildlife and other environmental issues, finding no problems as long as some conditions are met.

The main condition is that the tidal inundation must stay within the proposed area and not kill stands of woodland around the meadow. The state is also calling for a long-term monitoring program to make sure saltwater movement does not exceed proposed limits.

"The monitoring plan must include provisions for corrective measures if the inundation exceeds the extent expected," the DEP's Land Use Regulation Program states in a letter to the Army Corps.

The chance of the saltwater going too far remains one of the main concerns of residents and elected officials south of the Cape May Canal. Most residents are not aware that the original plan to build berms to protect inland areas has been scrapped as being too expensive. Army Corps spokesman Merv Brokke said the berms became too expensive when it was determined that materials dredged to bring in the saltwater are too fine-grained to make effective berms. Brokke said trucking in materials would inflate the price of the project from \$2.9 million to \$3.7 million.

"It was not cost-effective," Brokke said.

Instead, Brokke said the project will rely on boards at the water-control structure that would be constructed near the Delaware Bay. Boards can be added or removed to control the amount of saltwater flooding the meadow, Brokke said.

Some locals are a bit nervous about the ability to control the saltwater once it is allowed back in. The meadow was open to the tides originally but has been closed since 1917, when the Cape May County Mosquito Extermination Commission closed it off to combat the saltmarsh mosquito.

"How does the saltwater know where to stop?" asked Shunpike Road resident Fred Long, a critic of the project. "A good wind could drive the saltwater farther east. A line on a map won't contain anything. I don't think the saltwater will stay where they think it will."

Long pointed to all the dead trees at Green Creek where a similar project, though it was run by the county, brought saltwater in to kill phragmites.

Brokke, however, said that is what the water-control structure is for. He said when storms are forecast more boards can be added. The project calls for a 920-foot inlet from the bay to the water-control structure, which will be 17 feet tall and 40 feet wide. A jetty is proposed to protect the new inlet.

"We think we have a good solution to controlling the water," Brokke said.

Long worries about strong winds and full-moon tides. He questions the DEP's decision, called a "consistency determination," when the state is acting as a partner with the Army Corps on the project. He said the county Department of Mosquito Control, which has replaced the old commission, is also involved and will do much of the dredging work.

"Everybody's a wolf on this. We have three wolves covering one chicken coop," Long said.

The stance from the Army Corps is that the dense stand of phragmites has reduced the diversity of fish and wildlife. It argues the project will benefit wildlife, reduce the fire hazard posed by the reeds and limit pesticide spraying to kill mosquitoes, since a freshwater species of the blood-sucking pest has flourished in the meadow. The Army Corps also argues that the project will allow it to better control flooding, including the rainwater that sometimes fills up the meadow and can't get out to the bay.

The state looked into a number of environmental issues. It found the project will affect wetlands, but no mitigation is needed because the new inlet and channels dug into the meadow will "have an overall positive impact." The state also looked at endangered and threatened species, determining the changeover of the marsh to smooth cordgrass, salt hay and spike grass will be good for such wildlife.

The state also looked at impacts to the beach and dune system. While the new inlet, which follows the historic inlet closed in 1917, would destroy just less than an acre of beach and dune, the state notes that 1.2 acres are being created nearby at an existing channel. It found the work consistent with state rules if conditions are met, including:

New dune areas must be planted with appropriate coastal species.

The new dunes must be of comparable width and height as the surrounding dunes.

The new jetty must be at a height so as not to interfere with the longshore drifts and currents in the Delaware Bay.

While the state does not mention the water supply of nearby residents, Brokke said there will be monitoring of well water before and after the project. Brokke said there is funding this year to complete all plans and specifications. The project would go to construction in 2007 if federal funding is approved.